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Digital Legislatures

By Shane Peterson - September 2002

Electronic government means doing more than putting transactions and information online. Electronic government means improving the democratic process. In this first Digital Legislatures Award, the Center for Digital Government and Government Technology magazine recognize the legislatures that have made it simpler for the public to participate in legislative activities.

Despite its importance, the legislative process is a mystery to most.

Ask the average person what it takes for a bill to become a law in his or her state, and you'll likely get a blank stare in reply.

To shed a little electronic sunshine on how legislatures work, states have created a depth of online services for the public, which are being honored with the first Digital Legislatures Awards from the Center for Digital Government and *Government Technology* magazine.

State legislatures were ranked based on their service offerings in the following catergories:

- Can citizens easily follow online the decisions made by the Legislature, and direct comments and suggestions to shoe those elected to represent their interests?

- In the state Legislature, how is computing used in the House and Senate?

- Does the public have remote access to legislative proceedings?

Because so much progress has been made, ranking the states has proven difficult, resulting in a three-way tie for third.

"We looked at computer usage in the states' legislatures — whether the members used laptops as part of their everyday routine," said Cathilea Robinett, executive director of the Center for Digital

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Government. "We looked at broadband deployment in legislative chambers. We looked at streaming audio and video on legislatures' Web sites. We looked at the functionality and effectiveness of the legislatures' Web sites as the final factor in determining the winners. There were subtle differences between all the sites."

And The Winner Is ...

Arizona takes top honors in the 2002 Digital Legislatures Award.

The Legislature's [Web site](#) contains complete information on all state legislation. The Arizona Legislative Information System (ALIS) allows the public to create a free, individualized bill-tracking system to select bills to track and receive alerts on. All bills are online and searchable by keyword, bill number, bill title and sponsor name.

Constituents can find complete e-mail addresses for members of the state's Legislature, and can search for elected representatives via ZIP code or a map of the state's legislative districts. Updates to the Web site occur 15 to 20 minutes after information is posted to the Legislature's internal ALIS network.

Arizona residents can use the Legislature's Web site to access streaming video of all committee hearings and legislative activities on the floor in the House and the Senate.

"Arizona was head and shoulders above the rest," Robinett said. "Their push technology is very, very robust in terms of what sort of legislative notifications one can sign up for."

Creating a digital legislature is simply part of electronic government, said Craig Stender, CIO of Arizona, drawing a parallel between the increase of demand for legislative services online and other government services.

"With electronic government and our digital democracy efforts, what we find is that we're still in the phase where citizens are pleasantly surprised with our efforts," Stender said. "But you can see the ratcheting up of expectations with things like vehicle renewal and being able to view legislative sessions online; it's still new and it's still exciting and people are still forgiving of things that don't go right."

Providing as much legislative information as possible is also an exercise in civic education, he said, and helps chip away the lack of knowledge that most citizens have of the legislative process.

"For people to participate in the process, they need to be educated," he said. "The best way to get educated is to have quality information available. In the past, you'd have to go down to the state capitol to get the information you wanted. If it's available at your fingertips and you're educated and you can join up with other people that have the same views as you, you can participate in the process much easier."

All members of the House and Senate have laptops, and all rooms used by the two chambers are wired for Internet access and broadcasting of streaming video, Stender said.

"One of the more recent additions is that, for the Senate, the public at large can submit their speaking slips online for specific hearings," he said, adding that interested members of the public use speaking slips to ask permission to speak in favor of a bill or against a bill before a particular committee hearing.

"There are terminals in the hallways of the Senate that people can use, or you can do it from home before you go the capitol."

In Second Place Is ...
Louisiana took second place in the 2002 Digital Legislatures Awards.

The Louisiana Legislature's joint **Web page** gives access to a range of legislative information, including committee meetings and schedules; Senate and House chamber schedules and agendas; bill and resolution text, amendments, votes, fiscal and actuarial notes, narrative summaries of the bills or resolutions and a history of legislative actions; bill searches by bill number, author or keyword as well as a keyword search of the bill or resolution summary; and finding legislators by name, district number and/or address.

"Louisiana was also head and shoulders above the rest," Robinett said. "But the state's push technology is a fee-based, limited subscription service."

State Rep. Hunt Downer has served in the Louisiana Legislature since 1975, including a stint as speaker of the House. Downer pushed hard to modernize the House, including introducing computers and information systems to the legislative process. It wasn't exactly an easy process.

"Our legislature had been well established, almost entrenched, in doing it the old way," Downer said. "Any time you talk about something that's new, innovative and out of the box, you always have some challenge to it. When I was elected speaker in 1996, we recognized that we needed to not only become digitally connected, but, also, to go a step beyond and prepare for the future."

In both the House and Senate, members have laptop computers and broadband connectivity that gives them the ability to track and manage calendars, the status of bills and amendments and when a bill or amendment has been submitted. The public can view real time, live web casts of Senate chamber proceedings. Archived chamber proceedings and real time web casts of committee meetings are available only for the House and Joint Committee meetings.

"We have a lot of citizens whose geographical location is four to six hours away from the state capitol, " Downer said. "By putting the

legislation online — by webcasting committee proceedings and floor debates and by allowing the citizen to find out what's going on — I think it makes for a better product, and our product of government is laws. The closer you can bring government and decision making to the citizen, the better the decision making is because it's more practical and more realistic. You don't lose that element of common sense."

A Three-Way Tie for Third Place

Rounding out the top five spots in the 2002 Digital Legislatures Award are Connecticut, Kentucky and South Dakota.

All three states tied for third place.

The states' legislative offerings are very similar: All three offer state residents the ability to search legislation through a number of ways (bill sponsor, key words, bill number, for example). All three states offer personalization features for residents, such as allowing specified bills to be tracked and e-mail notifications when any action occurs on those bills.

In all three states' legislatures, members of both the House and the Senate use computers with broadband connectivity to track and manage calendars, the status of bills and amendments' status and submission dates.
Connecticut and South Dakota have a slight edge over Kentucky with respect to making legislative proceedings.

In those two states, there is dedicated public affairs coverage on cable TV and full Internet webcasts of real time (and archived) legislative proceedings, including committee hearings.

In Connecticut, much of the work to transform the Legislature into a body that uses technology to make the legislative process more transparent came from the state's Y2K preparations, said Rock Regan, CIO of Connecticut.

"When a lot of the Y2K work was being done, we looked at a lot of the requirements in all branches of government," he said. "A lot of the work that's happened with the Legislature was Y2K related — a lot of infrastructure was replaced and infused — and that really was the springboard to allow the Legislature to do a lot more."

Technological improvements don't happen in a vacuum, and they don't happen without funding. Regan said much of what the state did was due to the Legislature's willingness to appropriate the needed funds for such offerings as online web casting services.

Those services have become very popular, Regan said, and, depending on the hearing, popular enough to cause a strain.

"To a certain degree, some of those webcasts have been problematic," he said. "We've had to look at the usage and make sure we can put some controls on the usage so we don't entirely

bring down some parts of the network. Particularly with a lot of the hearings with the Department of Public Utility Control that deal with telecom laws and broadband laws, they can get a lot of attention."

The number of people using electronic services from the Legislature has been a pleasant surprise, and more successful than many people originally expected, Regan said.

"It certainly de-mystifies the process," he said. "It's the old, 'We don't care how you make sausage.' But the truth of the matter is that people are watching us make sausage. I get a lot comments from people who have watched committee hearings or a legislative session and have been fascinated by the process."

It's Good For Everybody

Making a digital legislature isn't just about making the process transparent to the public, said Otto Doll, South Dakota's CIO and commissioner of the state's Bureau of Information and Telecommunications. It's also about making things better for legislators themselves and state workers who track legislation.

"We take it to a level, a point of collaboration," he said. "To me, as a technologist, this is an issue of automating a process and providing a degree of collaboration. There's obviously many more pieces to this — there's the aspect of a legislator actually going online, entering a bill and, when in a committee meeting, using a laptop to look at the bill and they can look at statutes — but the whole context, to me, is, 'I have this collaborative environment that I want to create.'"

Part of that environment is making information more easily available to that portion of state and local government that's interested in hearing what legislators have to say.

"One of our biggest listening pools is state government employees that are responsible for keeping track of bills, monitoring their own bills, etc.," Doll said. "Before, they would have people sitting in the audience. Now, they have people sitting at their desk listening.

"It opens it up," he said. "In the past, one person would be sacrificed to go and sit through a committee because bills might not always come up, even though they're slated to. Mary goes out, she sits in the audience, and then everybody waits for the report to come back of what was said. Or, for that frantic phone call saying, 'You better get over here and deal with this.' Now you may have five people sitting back in the office listening in to the hearing. That's part of the process, and I think that this makes for a richer, more effective process."

In many respects, legislatures are the final frontier for governments seeking to broaden their electronic government services.

"When you talk about digital democracy, this is it," Robinett said. "If you're a citizen and you really want to track a specific bill and you

get an e-mail every day notifying you of the status of that bill, that's more civic participation than we've had in a long time. If a citizen wants to go online and see what their senator said about a school bond issue, that is digital democracy."

Shane Peterson

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